

Quick and Simple Facts about North Carolina

Population

8,683,242 (2005 estimate)

Capital

Raleigh, established 1792

Area

52,712 square miles

Name Origin

From Latin *Carolus*, in honor of King Charles I of England

Nickname

Tar Heel State
Old North State

Motto

Esse Quam Videri
"To Be Rather Than to Seem"

The State Nickname: Why "Tar Heels"?

North Carolina's nickname can be traced to the production of naval stores—tar, pitch, and turpentine—during the colonial period. Few people realize that from 1720 to 1870, North Carolina led the world in the production of naval stores. An abundance of longleaf pines made this achievement possible.

Raw turpentine was collected from the pines. When dry pinewood was cut into small strips and burned in an earthen kiln, tar was produced. The boiling of tar in open pits or iron cauldrons yielded pitch. Tar and pitch were used extensively in shipbuilding to chink cracks between the boards of ships'

hulls to make them watertight and to protect ropes from water damage and rotting. Great Britain prized naval stores greatly since the country possessed a strong navy.

Naval stores came to symbolize not only North Carolina but also its inhabitants. Newspapers of the 1700s document the claim that North Carolinians were called both "tar-burners" and "tar boilers." One unconfirmed story relates that the British began using the expression "tar heel" prior to the Revolutionary War. Some say the name may have originated because naval-store laborers who worked around the kilns would naturally have tar stuck to their shoes.

As North Carolina writer Richard Walser said, "Fortunately, perhaps, the origin of the term is beautifully hidden in mystery, tradition, and legend." Still, many stories claim to reveal why North Carolinians bear the nickname "tar heels." Tradition tells us that during the Revolution, Lord Cornwallis's troops forded a river where naval stores had been dumped by the Americans to prevent capture. Upon crossing the river, the British discovered tar on their feet. The river that they crossed is known as the Tar River.

Another popular Civil War story relates that North Carolina troops were asked by a soldier from another Confederate state if there were any tar left in the Old North State. "No, not a bit. President Jeff Davis has bought it all up." "Is that so? What is he going to do with it?" The North Carolinians rejoined, "He's going to put it on your heels to make you stick better in the next fight." And, as the story goes, General Robert E. Lee, upon hearing of the incident, said, "God bless the Tar Heel boys."